

Report

Soap operas may be good for health: impact evaluation of the Egyptian soap opera, *Family house*

Farag M. Elkamel¹

Introduction

Family house is an Egyptian soap opera consisting of 15 episodes, each lasting about 45 minutes. This series was devised in order to use the entertainment approach and format of a soap opera to convey health messages designed to create awareness, give knowledge and change attitudes and behaviour with regard to several health problems, including acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS), acute respiratory infections (ARI), home accidents, drug addiction, child marriages and child-spacing. *Family house* was created in 1992/1993 by the Center for Development Communication (CDC), Egypt, and was supported by grants from the Ford Foundation, the International Development Research Center (IDRC) and United States Agency for International Development (USAID). It was broadcast in Morocco in 1993 and in Egypt and Lebanon in 1994. *Family house* will eventually air in other countries of the Region.

The objective of this project was to test the potential impact of television material, particularly a drama series, on the knowledge, attitudes and behaviour of the general public, particularly women. The rationale for the project is that such material captures

the attention of the majority of viewers, more so than any other type of television programme, and this provides an excellent opportunity to reach the general public. The project also aimed to establish which socioeconomic and demographic categories of the public were likely to benefit most from such an approach.

After *Family house* was aired in Egypt in January 1994, a survey of 600 viewers was carried out to assess audience feedback. The cluster sample was randomly selected from upper Egypt, Cairo and the Delta; it reflected the urban-rural distribution of the population and males and females were equally represented (Table 1).

Findings

One of the evaluation criteria was the perceived entertainment value of *Family house*. Respondents were, therefore, asked whether or not they had liked it. As an indirect measurement, they were also asked whether or not they would like to see a sequel. A second evaluation criterion was the educational value of the serial. Participants were asked a number of questions which

¹Professor of Communication, Cairo University and Director, Center for Development Communication, Cairo, Egypt.

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aimed at assessing what, if anything, they had learned from watching *Family house*.

The findings were encouraging on both counts. The majority of respondents (82.5%) liked the serial, 74.0% said that they had learned from it and 79.0% expressed a positive attitude towards a sequel. The findings also revealed that women audiences in rural areas and semi-literate viewers particularly liked the serial

and learned more from it than other segments of the audience (Table 2). Table 3 shows the relationship between educational level and appreciation of *Family house*.

Most soap operas and other entertainment material usually appeal to the middle classes and often to urban viewers. The fact that rural and illiterate viewers particularly liked *Family house* is consistent with the educational objectives of the serial; it is those segments of the audience who are most in need of the educational messages it contained.

Table 1 Sociodemographic characteristics of the sample

Characteristic	No.	%
Sex		
Male	307	51.2
Female	293	48.8
Residence		
Urban	346	57.7
Rural	254	42.3
Region		
Cairo	174	29.0
Delta	256	42.7
Upper Egypt	170	28.3
Educational level		
Less than secondary school	248	41.3
Secondary school and college	352	58.7

Table 3 Liking of *Family house* by level of education

Educational level	Total number	Liking No.	%
Illiterate	90	85	94.4
Semi-literate	59	54	91.5
Primary education	99	87	87.9
High school	218	182	83.5
College	124	82	66.1
Higher education	10	5	50.0
Total	600	495	85.5

Table 2 Response of certain categories of the audience to *Family house*

Question	Total sample n = 600		Those answering yes					
			Women n = 293		Rural n = 254		High school educated n = 248	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Did you like <i>Family house</i> ?	495	82.5	251	86.0	225	89.0	226	91.0
Did you learn from <i>Family house</i> ?	444	74.0	223	76.0	208	82.0	199	80.0
Would you like to see a sequel?	474	79.0	243	83.0	223	88.0	219	88.0

Table 4 Most important things learned from *Family house*

Thing learned	%
Causes and prevention of AIDS	19.7
Need to communicate with one's children	18.6
Influence of bad friends	17.4
Importance of perseverance	8.8
Need to protect one's children	8.4
Seriousness of drug addiction	7.7
Advantages of child spacing	7.5
Need to be close to one's children	7.2
Other	4.7
Total	100.0

Those who said that they had liked the serial were asked to state what they liked most. Of those, 18% mentioned a particular actor or actress as what they liked most, 17% liked particular scenes or events, 12% mentioned AIDS, 10% liked the educational messages generally, 8% mentioned the theme of caring for one's children, 8% liked the songs, 7% liked the story on addiction and the rest mentioned various other things.

Those who said that they had learned from the serial were also asked to give examples of what they had learned. The most frequent answer was related to the causes and prevention of AIDS. Table 4 shows what the participants considered the most important things they had learned from watching *Family house*.

Knowledge of how AIDS is transmitted was quite high among respondents; 85% mentioned that AIDS is transmitted through sexual contact and about 90% mentioned blood transfusion, contaminated needles or

injecting drugs. Of those who knew how AIDS is transmitted, 9% stated that they had acquired this information for the first time from *Family house*. However, this figure increased to 15% among those with less than high school education, to 12% among female viewers and to 14% among rural viewers.

Conclusion

The potential of entertainment as a communications approach for health education is once again emphasized by this data. Some of the promising features are:

- The overall liking of this "educational" television serial was high and compares well with serials which are produced solely for entertainment purposes.
- A large percentage of the audience did indeed learn from the serial and mentioned specific information they had acquired.
- Nine per cent (9%) of viewers learned of the causes and prevention of AIDS for the first time from the serial; this is a major gain, given the initially high levels of knowledge of the subject among the audience.
- Perhaps the most promising finding is that the traditionally information-deprived segments of the population, namely women, rural residents, semi-literates and youth, clearly liked the serial and learned more from it than other segments of the population. This may be a breakthrough as it has always been difficult to deliver development messages through mass media to these segments of the population, when they are the ones most in need of them.